

How New Climate Talks May Give Paris Accords Some Teeth

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Body

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WASHINGTON -- With the world still struggling to get global warming under control, diplomats from nearly 200 countries are scheduled to meet in Poland over the next two weeks to try to put global climate negotiations back on track.

The focus of the meeting? To hammer out a key set of rules for the Paris climate agreement that, delegates hope, will help prod countries to cut fossil-fuel emissions far more deeply in the years ahead than they're currently doing.

Under the Paris deal, signed by world leaders in 2015, virtually every country on Earth agreed to submit a plan for curbing emissions and vowed to ratchet up efforts over time. But key questions about how that process would unfold were left unanswered: How thoroughly should countries report their progress on emissions? How detailed should their plans for making further cuts be?

Delegates at the conference -- being held in Katowice, at the heart of Poland's coal-mining region, and which is known as COP24, shorthand for its formal name -- will haggle over a "rule book" that will lay out the answers to those and other key questions. The debates are often technical, but highly contentious: China, for instance, has suggested that developing countries should be held to looser reporting standards, but Europe and the United States have pushed back.

"This is going to be one of the most difficult negotiations we've seen yet," said Andrew Light, a senior climate change adviser at the State Department under President Barack Obama. "There are so many moving parts."

The stakes are high: While countries agreed in Paris to keep global temperatures from rising more than 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, above preindustrial levels, the plans that various countries have written so far are wildly insufficient to that task. Currently, the world is on pace for around 3 degrees Celsius of warming or more, bringing far higher risks of deadly heat waves, floods, the collapse of polar ice caps and other potential calamities.

What's more, some countries are now backsliding. The Trump administration has disavowed the Paris deal and plans to pull the United States out by 2020, though the country will nonetheless send officials to Poland to participate in talks. Australia and Brazil also have newly elected leaders opposed to more forceful climate action, and some analysts are now finding signs of a "Trump effect" that could undermine global efforts on climate change.

What's the point of these climate talks?

To understand the Katowice meeting, it's useful to recall that the Paris climate agreement was largely intended to work through peer pressure among nations.

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Under the Paris agreement, countries aren't required to submit legally binding plans for reducing emissions. Instead, each country submits a voluntary plan tailored to its own domestic situation. This structure, the architects of the Paris deal said, was the most realistic way to get every world leader to agree to participate.

But those architects also realized that countries aren't doing nearly enough to keep the world below 2 degrees Celsius of warming. So, under Paris, countries are required to meet periodically, assess their collective progress and see where stronger action can be taken. World leaders could then push each other to ratchet up their ambitions over time.

At least, that's the theory.

But for this peer-pressure dynamic to have any chance of working, analysts say, countries will need to track and report their progress on curbing emissions in a transparent, standardized way. And they'll need to offer much more detail on how they intend to cut fossil-fuel emissions in the future, so that outside experts can scrutinize their plans and point out exactly where current climate policies are falling short.

Right now, this is often difficult to do. For instance, many countries, like Indonesia, have pledged to reduce their emissions below a "business as usual" trajectory. But without a clearer sense of what counts as business as usual, it can be hard to track how much these countries are really doing.

So, in Katowice, negotiators will hash out these thorny details, like how rigorously countries should track their progress or what level of outside scrutiny future pledges should face. One current draft of the negotiating text is 236 pages long, and, according to an analysis by Carbon Brief, contains more than 3,700 items where countries still disagree on wording. Negotiators have until Dec. 14 to resolve all of them.

What are the big disagreements?

The rule book is expected to provoke fierce debate. Some developing countries have argued that they should be given much more leeway in how they report and track their progress, especially if they have limited technical capacity to measure their emissions. China, in particular, has long been wary of outside scrutiny.

Other countries, like the United States and Europe, are leery of holding countries like China, India and others to a lower standard because developing nations account for 60 percent of global emissions today.

Money is another perennial sticking point. India and African countries, for example, have long insisted that wealthy nations need to provide more financing to help poorer governments shift to clean energy or adapt to the impacts of global warming. They have pushed for much more detailed pledges on aid.

Looming over all these debates is the uncertain role of the United States, which played a critical part in bringing countries together to finalize the initial Paris agreement in 2015.

While the State Department is still sending a team to negotiate the rule book, the Trump administration has largely repudiated the Paris deal and has refused to send an additional \$2 billion in climate aid that had been pledged by the Obama administration at Paris. It is still unclear how much influence the United States will have at this newest round of talks, or whether any other countries might step in to take a leadership role.

"The global political environment is really challenging right now, with nationalism taking hold in many countries," said Samantha Gross, a fellow in the Cross-Brookings Initiative on Energy and Climate, in a recent telephone call with reporters.

How will this affect climate change?

The most important work on climate change policy will continue to be done by national and local governments around the world; by private businesses, investors and individuals; and by scientists and engineers developing clean-energy technologies.

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"While this multilateral process is important, it is not the solution to climate change," said Elliot Diringer, executive vice president at the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. "At best, it can help facilitate climate action over time."

In that regard, few countries are expected to come to Poland with sweeping new climate policy announcements. For instance, Germany, which has been discussing when to set a date for phasing out its coal consumption, has postponed any major decision until after the meeting.

One big question is whether the negotiators will wrap up the talks with a strong rule book in hand. Under the Paris deal, countries have informally agreed to consider revising their near-term emissions pledges by 2020 to make them stronger. Analysts will be watching to see if countries emerge from Katowice with a clear intent to increase their ambitions, or if the Trump administration's refusal to tackle climate change might persuade other leaders to slacken their own efforts.

If negotiators at Katowice struggle to agree on a robust rule book, or the talks deadlock entirely, that could further sap global momentum for climate action.

"The worst case is a complete collapse of talks, which would be seen as an unraveling of the Paris agreement," said Mr. Diringer. "But for that reason, I think that's an outcome most governments would like to avoid."

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/climate/cop24-climate-conference-katowice.html>

Graphic

PHOTO: Poland, host to the COP24 climate conference, has no serious plan in place to reduce its dependence on coal. The nation currently burns coal to provide nearly 80 percent of its energy. (PHOTOGRAPH BY SEAN GALLUP/GETTY IMAGES)

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